Interview with Arthur L. Lowrie

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

ARTHUR L. LOWRIE

Interviewed by: Patricia Lessard and Theodore Lowrie

Initial interview date: December 23, 1989

Q: Mr. Lowrie how did you get interested in the Foreign Service, and then how did you subsequently enter the Foreign Service?

LOWRIE: Mine was a typical American Foreign Service story. As a young man I had the wanderlust of the small-town American upbringing. I left college in the middle of my junior year and enlisted in the Air Force, primarily because I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. I didn't even know what I wanted to major in. I was majoring in English literature at the time. That was during the Korean War and I spent four years in the Air Force as an enlisted man. I served eighteen months in Libya—my first experience with anything remotely connected to the Middle East. I also was able to take two trips to Europe and learn a little bit about living abroad. While I was in Tripoli I started going to the University of Maryland night school taking Italian and International Relations. I decided shortly thereafter that a Foreign Service career was going to be my goal. When I got out of the Air Force I returned to Allegheny College and picked up enough credits so that I could finish in one year. I also won a fellowship for a graduating senior interested in pursuing a career in foreign affairs. So with that fellowship, plus my GI Bill, I was off to Europe, spent three months in France in Tours then I went to the Graduate Institute of International Studies

in Geneva for one year where I studied under Jacques Freymond and other European professors.

On my way to France back in July of 1955, I had taken the Foreign Service exam at the Embassy in London. The Foreign Service was really opening up at that time and the written and the oral exams were being given at selected embassies abroad. I learned during the academic year that I had squeaked through the written exam and that the oral panel would be in the Embassy in Rome. I went to Rome in the Spring of 1956 and took my oral exam. At the end of the Summer I learned that I had been accepted into the Foreign Service and I dropped any idea of further graduate study and went right into the Service in September 1956.

Q: Would you talk about your early posts and your career at that time and anything of historical interest.

LOWRIE: My first post was really an ideal one. Aleppo, Syria. I got there the day of the opening January 2, 1957. Two officers to begin with, Roy Atherton the Consul General, who went on to become a very distinguished Ambassador, Assistant Secretary and Director General of the Foreign Service. He taught me a great deal. It was an ideal post, not only because of Roy Atherton, but I had an opportunity to do all those things that young FSOs should, consular work primarily but also commercial work, protection and welfare and even a bit of political work. I learned that I definitely wanted to be a political officer. It was also my first contact with the Arabic language, except for the Air Force service in Libya, and I began studying Arabic part-time.

The highlights of that tour were the formation of the United Arab Republic in February 1958; the visit to Aleppo of Gamal Abdel Nasser in March of 1958 which was a tumultuous affair, hundreds of thousands of people, tremendous enthusiasm for Nasser personally; and my first real experience with an Arab mob, which can be frightening even when they're happy. Another highlight was one of my few scoops. On New Year's Day 1959 I called

on the Director General of G2, Marwan Sibai, as a courtesy call the way we did on all the religious and civil dignitaries on major holidays. Marwan Sibai informed me that he had been up all night arresting communists and it wasn't just true of the northern region of the UAR or Aleppo, it was throughout the United Arab Republic including Egypt. On New Year's Day the late John Wheelock—a great guy—who was then Acting Consul General, and I got out the old one-time pads and sent an immediate message to Washington about Nasser's crackdown on the communist party.

I was then sent back to the Department (that was the practice then, the first two years in the Department, next two years in the field, or vice versa) where I spent two years in INR writing the old NIS for Greece, Turkey and Iran. I think I did industry and mining for Iran and Turkey. A very painstaking and laborious work considered very dull by most officers, including me, but of enormous benefit to my later career because it taught me the need for thoroughness and accuracy.

Following INR I requested and was granted Arabic language and area training at the Foreign Service School in the Embassy in Beirut, where I spent the next 20 months doing my best to learn to read and write Arabic and more about the Middle East. Those were very exciting years for a young officer interested in the Middle East; coups d'etat, border closings, riots, etc. I might just say a word about what the Foreign Service was like at that time among FSOs in the Middle East. There was an esprit de corps that I as a young newcomer without any previous contacts among other members of the Foreign Service really found quite incredible. Whenever we visited other posts we were immediately taken in by our counterparts, everyone was treated as a member of the family and given the warmest possible hospitality. I'm not sure when we lost that but I know it doesn't exist anymore to the extent it used to.

After Beirut I was assigned as Political Officer to the Embassy in Khartoum where I had the great pleasure of working with Ambassador William Rountree and his DCM Tom McElhiney. Both of these gentlemen represented the very best of the professionalism

of the Foreign Service, objective, thorough, sticklers for accuracy and good writing and telling Washington like it is. It was a very exciting period in the Sudan. As a young Second Secretary I was one of the work horses and spent most of my time on the opposition to the General Abboud government and the perennial North-South problem that had been going on since 1955. It was the attempts of the north then, as now, to enforce an Islamization and an Arabization on the Christian/pagan tribes of the South that was creating armed resistance. During my tour, the foreign missionaries got caught up in it and quite unjustly were expelled in toto. This included a large number of Americans, some of whom had been there their whole adult lives working with some of the more primitive tribes of Africa. And I had the unique experience of visiting some of them in their tribal situation and I came to have the greatest respect for the perseverance and the good works that these missionaries performed, particularly in medical care and education, two areas that both the British and the early Sudanese government had been willing to give them responsibility.

My tour in the Sudan ended very abruptly in October 1964 when I was declared PNG by the Sudanese government. The Under Secretary of the Foreign Ministry called in Ambassador Rountree on a Friday and informed him of this. Ambassador Rountree, true to character, said he was quite aware of my activities, I had done nothing improper and that he was not going to send me out until he heard the reasons from the Foreign Minister Ahmed Khair. Ambassador Rountree sent a cable to that effect to Washington, but a NIACT IMMEDIATE came back from the Department telling the Ambassador to send me out of the country at once without waiting for any explanation. I later found out from friends in the Department that Secretary Rusk himself had made that decision; the reason being that the Abboud government was being very helpful in preventing arms and other assistance from getting to the Congolese rebels by air or by land from Egypt or the Soviet Union. We were not about to make a disposable Second Secretary an issue between our two governments. So I left Khartoum on Monday morning for Kenya and the Ambassador's appointment with the Foreign Minister never took place because the Abboud government

was overthrown that morning. But by then, my having been PNG and was fairly widely known and it was decided it would not be prudent for me to return.

I was shortly thereafter assigned to Tunisia as a Political/Labor Officer where I spent three years, again in a very interesting and pleasant, exciting post working for the most part with very enjoyable professionals. My Ambassador in Tunisia was the late Francis Russell who was a very different kind of Ambassador from Ambassador Rountree and other real professionals that I had known in Syria, for example James Moose and Charles Yost. Francis Russell was very much the public relations type Ambassador who was very energetic, looked the part, very much seeking to improve both governmental and popular opinion in its relations with the United States. Lots of traveling around the countries, lots of visits, but unfortunately in his desire to put the best possible face on Tunisia-US relations, President Bourguiba, etc. carried over into his reporting back to Washington as if the main purpose of the reporting was to provide justification to use back in Washington with the Congress and the bureaucracy to support continuing large aid program. The chief of the Political Section, Steve McClintic, and I found this intellectually dishonest. He paid a very high price for expressing his differences of opinion and his more skeptical view of Bourguiba—in fact it ended his career. I paid a smaller price later on. But Francis Russell was, in fact, the only Ambassador I ever had who without actually telling lies, always preferred to twist words to put his most favorable possible interpretation on events.

My major task in Tunisia was following the labor union (the UGTT) and Bourguiba's attempts to end any semblance of independence it still possessed. This was of particular interest to the United States because the UGTT enjoyed the support of the AFL-CIO and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions. George Meany and Irving Brown were very active in countering Bourguiba's moves.

When I left Tunisia I had requested and received assignment for a six-month tour of duty at the Armed Forces Staff College because in those days Political Officers were encouraged to broaden their horizons and I recognized the importance of the military in all

aspects of foreign policy. I learned a great deal about the military, partly because civilians were not at a disadvantage because the officers didn't know anything more about the other services than we few civilians did. The primary purpose of the school was to train staff officers for combined and unified commands. A very worthwhile experience that paid dividends for me later.

I returned to Washington in January 1968 to take over the Tunisian Desk, or so I thought. Shortly before returning I learned that I was going back to INR to work on North Africa because Ambassador Russell had come back and let it be known that he did not think I was suitable for the job because I wasn't enthusiastic enough about Bourguiba and Tunisia. I was replaced in that job by Frank Wisner.

I served a year and a half in INR and it turned out to be a very worthwhile assignment because I worked for Oliver Troxel, who later became Ambassador to Zambia. He was one of the best minds I had ever run across in the Foreign Service and he insisted on the best possible writing in the shortest possible space from all of his officers. He also was very well regarded by the Secretary and Assistant Secretaries and a lot of weight was given to the papers coming out of his office. The most significant little contribution I made in that assignment was taking all of the raw intelligence from all agencies on the war which had heated up in the southern Sudan and drawing up the first real order of battle, personalities and leadership of the southern Sudanese guerrilla force.

After 18 months I got the Algerian Desk which was my first and only operational assignment in Washington. I spent an extremely interesting three years involved with different parts of the Government and corporate America regarding the huge contract between El Paso Natural Gas Company and Algeria for the importation over a 20-year period of liquefied natural gas into the United States. The Federal Power Commission had to be convinced not only of the economic feasibility of the project, but the political reliability of the Algerian government. Not an easy task given the fact that the Algerian government had not yet established much of a track record, having been independent

only eight years. Again in this tour I had the opportunity to work with one of the finest Foreign Service Officers I've known, Jim Blake, who was the Director of the Office of North African Affairs. He had objectivity and intellectual integrity. What particularly endeared him to me was his frankness in personal dealings, not a characteristic which all Foreign Service Officers possess. That office, by the way, was one of the best in the Department. We had Frank Wisner on the Tunisia Desk, Rocky Suddarth on the Libya Desk, Paul Hare on the Morocco Desk and Dick Jackson on the Sudan, all of whom went on to become Ambassadors. One other aspect of the Algerian Desk job was, as I mentioned, dealing with corporate America at a very high level; the head of El Paso, the top executives of Boeing, and people like Clark Clifford and Paul Warnke who the Algerians had hired.

Following the Algerian Desk, I persuaded NEA that I was the man to reopen the post in Baghdad, since it had been manned by Belgian diplomats from 1967 until my arrival in Baghdad in September 1972. There is an interesting historical footnote connected with Belgium being the protecting power. It is not a role that Belgium traditionally assumes. The Belgian Ambassador in 1967 was a famous war hero and a great friend of the United States. The American Embassy had been given a very short time to evacuate in 1967 and no country had yet agreed to take over our interests. The Belgian Ambassador on his own initiative said Belgium would be the protecting power. For that reason, perhaps, the US scrutiny of the Belgian performance was not as close as it might have been even on the Washington side and a considerable scandal developed in later years when it was found that one of the Iraqi employees had absconded with a large amount of money. The Belgian Ambassador who had by then gone on to other things was then Ambassador to Morocco and was one of the diplomats killed in that shooting in the early 1970s at King Hassan's garden party. Baghdad was a wonderful assignment professionally. I was, for all practical purposes, the American Ambassador. I was treated that way by the other diplomats and to a lesser extent by the Iraqi government.

Q: What were the key issues between Iraq and the United States at that time?

LOWRIE: There were many issues at which we were at odds, very few about which anything could be done. The nationalization of the Iraq Petroleum Company was a very big issue. The seizure of our embassy, including the Ambassador's residence which was by then serving as the Iraqi Foreign Ministry, was another. We were completely at odds over the Arab-Israeli conflict in which Iraq continued to portray itself as the most staunch defender of the Palestinians. The Kurdish struggle against the Iraqi government turned again to armed conflict. We professed neutrality, and I so informed the Iraqi government, but in fact we were assisting the Kurds. I didn't find that out until I was back in Washington at the end of my assignment in mid-1975 when I was talking with Roy Atherton who was then Assistant Secretary for NEA. The newspapers just a few days before our meeting had come out with the story that Nixon and Kissinger had contributed several million dollars to the Shah for support of the Kurds. I protested to Roy Atherton about being kept completely in the dark and, even worse, given instructions that I could assure the Iraqi government that the United States was in no way involved. Roy Atherton, despite his very high position in the State Department, assured me that he too had learned of this just a few days prior to the media disclosures.

Q: When did relations between the United States and Iraq begin to improve?

LOWRIE: As in Algeria, the first improvement in our relations followed the arrival of the Boeing aircraft that the Iraqis had bought. That was an interesting incident in itself because Boeing put on quite an elaborate arrival ceremony for the first aircraft and brought to Baghdad many of its senior executives and their wives, most of whom had never been in the Middle East before. In any case, the 727 arrived right on time and taxied up to the front of the spectators to unload. As soon as it turned off its motors, a group of Iraqis went in front of the plane with several sheep and goats, cut their throats and began spreading blood on the nose of the plane for good luck. At this moment the Boeing executives and their wives began coming out of the plane, walking down the gangplank a little concerned, perhaps, about being in Iraq with its reputation stemming from the 1958 bloody revolution.

And as they got off the plane they looked around and the first thing they saw was this blood being rubbed all over the nose of the plane. Some of them turned around and went right back inside the plane. Next to Boeing, the companies Iraq was most interested in attracting were high-tech companies related to the oil industry, and oil companies that were willing to sign service contracts. And they all began arriving in droves after the October War when the money began pouring into Baghdad.

Continuation of interview: November 17, 1990

Q: Mr. Lowrie, what kind of impression were you able to make or form of Saddam Hussein during the period of time you were there between 1972 and 1975?

LOWRIE: Although Saddam Hussein was the Vice President every one knew he was the real power running Iraq. He had succeeded in establishing the most effective police state that had ever existed in the Arab world. None of them could approach the effectiveness and widespread nature of the competing security services, the Baath Party security apparatus, etc. And his ruthlessness, too, was already well known. An example of the total arrogance and the unlimited power of the intelligence services occurred in late-1974/early-1975 when my driver Abbas, a good, stubborn, Kurdish employee of the US Government for many years, was arrested and held at the local police station. I went down immediately to find out what had happened. There was a police traffic lieutenant there and two security types in their dark glasses. They insisted there had been an automobile accident and Abbas was under arrest and there was nothing I could do about it. I demanded to see the automobiles. We went out and looked at them. Our Chevrolet Impala had a tiny little mark on the bumper. The Land Rover that the security types had been driving had no marks whatsoever. We came back in and I told the police lieutenant, there's been no accident here. This whole thing is ridiculous, trumped up and you can't take Abbas away. He just shrugged and threw up his hands. The security people just sat back and smirked and didn't even attempt to provide any justification, but the net result was Abbas went off to prison. He was held incommunicado for about three

weeks, tortured, and one day unceremoniously dumped out in the street in his pajamas in fairly bad shape. But he was very tough and immediately went back to work and carried out his duties for the US, which I believe he's still doing today. Despite the police state atmosphere in Iraq, by March 1975, when the fighting against the Kurds ended with the Algiers Treaty, it was an exciting time because Iraq was making a major push for importing western technology, the petrodollars were pouring in and so were American businessmen. I had the opportunity to get to know people like Cy Sulzberger—a wonderful man—and David Rockefeller—the first big corporate executive to be received by Saddam. Senator Ted Kennedy came in 1975 with an entourage of family and aides and stayed for three or four days. It was a very exciting time full of promise for the future of US-Iraqi relations if we could ever get over some of the political hurdles. Saddam had told Sulzberger that his model was Boumedienne and the kind of hard headed, pragmatic nationalism he represented. The March 1975 Algiers Agreement was a major turning point. I remember doing an analysis of that agreement for Washington emphasizing the parallel interests of Iraq and Iran with their both having a Kurdish problem, both being major oil producers, members of OPEC, having a long common border, desire for rapid economic development and everything seemed to point to the durability of this Agreement. My prediction was that the agreement would last. Unfortunately, it only lasted five years. It may well have been durable had it not been for the Iranian Revolution.

Q: Did you ever meet Saddam Hussein?

LOWRIE: I shook his hand at a large reception for the diplomatic corp. He was very secretive in his movements even then. He traveled in one of four identical black Mercedes with lots of bodyguards carrying AK-47s. Educated Iraqis were totally intimidated by his regime and shunned all but official contact with foreigners.

Additional highlights of my tour in Baghdad: In March 1973, six months before the Yom Kippur War, there was a Chiefs of Mission meeting of all NEA Ambassadors held in Tehran which I attended. The two principals from Washington were the Deputy Secretary

Kenneth Rush and NEA Assistant Secretary Joseph Sisco. Kenneth Rush's message basically was, don't be concerned about the Arab threat to use oil as a weapon because in his words “they can't drink the oil”! Joe Sisco's message was basically, don't worry about another Arab-Israeli war, Israeli military superiority is such that “Arab irrationality does not extend that far”! What was particularly striking about that meeting with all these distinguished Ambassadors and area experts, was that there was only one person in the room who disputed Sisco's comments and he was not a Middle East specialist but the Charg# d'Affaires in Tel Aviv, Owen Zurhellen. He said that at some point, given their numerical superiority in aircraft, artillery and tanks, the Arabs may well decide to go to war against Israel.

I mentioned David Rockefeller visited Baghdad in January 1975. His reception was initially quite cool. He was accompanied by Joseph Verner Reed who was then his Chief of Staff, later Ambassador in Morocco. David Rockefeller was having a couple of martinis at our house about 9:30pm when a phone call came saying that Saddam Hussein would see him. He went over and had a two hour relaxed, good natured tour d'horizon with Saddam and he returned very impressed with Saddam. He apparently had some personal message for Saddam from Henry Kissinger suggesting some kind of dialogue to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings. He elicited some interest from Saddam but no real response. Saddam, who was enjoying his newfound wealth by this time, also welcomed US economic activity including a mission from Chase Manhattan to look at the new five-year plan. He expressed to Rockefeller his perception that US strategy in the region was a pincer movement involving Israel and Iran directed at destroying the Iraqi revolution. David Rockefeller found that rather ridiculous and rebutted it at some length. But it is a good indication of the isolated, ethnocentric mentality of Saddam at that time. David Rockefeller impressed me as a real gentleman, very considerate, among the most pleasant VIPs I ever had to deal with.

Commercial activity kept growing and in January 1975 my longstanding request for a full-time commercial officer was met. On January 31, 1975, Boeing signed with Iraqi Airways

the biggest single contract it had ever concluded in the Middle East, under which Iraq would buy one 737, three 727s, four 747s and the total was valued at $220 million worth of aircraft for which the Iraqis were to pay in cash.

Q: Is there anything else of significance about the tour in Iraq before you left in August 1975?

LOWRIE: I remember being quite optimistic about the possibility of future US-Iraqi relations, based not on political understandings but because Saddam had shown a big streak of pragmatism by seeking western technology, western help, and dealing with people like David Rockefeller. Also Joe Draft, Rolland Evans, and others who had met him found him extremely intelligent, pragmatic, tough minded, but someone we could deal with. That, plus his decision in March 1975 to make the agreement with the Shah, giving up part of the Shatt Al Arab, ending the Kurdish revolt, and other border rectifications, all those things pointed to a leader that was ready to do what was necessary to move his country forward. The extent of his ambitions showed up only in terms of his threats and his subversive efforts in the Gulf states. The Gulf states, the small ones particularly, were obviously very concerned about his ambitions towards them.

Q: So, after Baghdad I believe you had a direct transfer to Cairo as Political Counselor.

LOWRIE: That's true. I drove with my children directly from Baghdad to Cairo via Beirut and the ferry from Beirut to Alexandria. Arrived in Cairo and moved into our house and within 48 hours started to work. I had been so involved in Iraqi affairs for so long that it took a little while to get my feet on the ground in Cairo. I arrived just before the second disengagement agreement between Egypt and Israel was reached. So it was a good place to start.

Q: The three years that you were at Cairo are very well documented. Are there any incidents or is there anything you can remember that isn't so well documented that you would like to talk about?

LOWRIE: Well, there are so many. These three years were by far the most professionally exciting of my career. Some of the things that stand out were after Sadat's incredible trip in November 1977 to Jerusalem which electrified everyone, and which had tremendous support among Egyptians, regardless of what one hears now. Shortly thereafter, Israeli journalists were allowed to visit Egypt and many of the most prominent ones came. They didn't find a lot of Egyptians to talk to. They were correctly, but coolly treated and they had a lot of trouble having meaningful conversations with Egyptians. They, as one might expect, turned to the American Embassy. Ambassador Eilts, probably the greatest Middle Eastern Ambassador in the history of the Foreign Service, did not like journalists, partly because he was the key link between Sadat and Carter. The job of briefing journalists, not just Israelis but American and foreigners, fell pretty much on me as Political Counselor. So there was a period there of a couple of months in which I must have briefed 15-20 Israeli journalists. I never thought I would be sitting in my office looking over the streets of Cairo and briefing Israeli journalists. I was tremendously impressed with many of them and I subsequently saw some of them in Israel and in Washington. I have great admiration for their professionalism and intelligence. The toughest most critical things written about Israel are, in fact, in the Israeli press.

Another highlight that stands out took place in January 1978, when a small Chiefs of Mission meeting was called by Assistant Secretary Roy Atherton of the Ambassadors in those countries most concerned with the peace process, Sam Lewis in Israel, Tom Pickering in Jordan, Dick Murphy in Syria, Dick Parker in Lebanon, John West in Saudi Arabia, and Hermann Eilts in Cairo. The night before the meeting was to take place, Ambassador Eilts' mother-in-law died at the Residence very unexpectedly. Ambassador Eilts, sent me to represent him and I went to that very small meeting with some of our

leading Middle East specialists. I left the meeting discouraged and shocked by what took place. Ambassador Eilts' and my own thinking were very close and I spoke forcefully, making such points as when it comes to security needs, Israel is like the Pentagon, there is never enough security. And as in Washington, it is the White House and the political leadership that has to step in and say enough is enough. In the case of the Arab-Israeli peace process, the same is true. The White House is going to have to step in and say enough is enough. The security provisions are sufficient and all you're going to get so let's move forward on the process. I also made the point that Sadat was very discouraged with the US role. He feels Israel knows the enormity of his concessions and they are now playing him for the fall guy, taking all of the concessions he had made and pocketing them and asking for more. Basically I pleaded for a greater, more active US role, not allowing Sadat to be the one to make all the concessions and really undermining his position at home and in the Arab world. The only Ambassador present who supported me in these views was Ambassador West, the political appointee. It wasn't that others like Dick Murphy, Dick Parker, Tom Pickering, did not support, they didn't say anything. Dick Parker and Dick Murphy apparently didn't think they should say anything that did not pertain to their particular countries, despite their long service in the area! Sam Lewis, on the other hand, who had the least experience in the Middle East, put forward the Israeli case with a forcefulness and articulateness that went without much rebuttal. I can only hope these other Ambassadors did more in private, out of the earshot of somebody like Sam Lewis. It was a good example of how a forceful, articulate person, even though he knows the least about the problems, is able to carry the day—very discouraging.

I had tremendous admiration for Sadat, what he had accomplished and the consistency with which he pushed for a settlement with Israel. There was by the middle of 1978 the feeling in the Embassy Political Section that we, at the behest of the Israelis, had asked so many concessions of Sadat, most of which he had given, that his position was already becoming almost untenable. One of the sick jokes we had had the Department instructing the Ambassador to go to Sadat with just one last request: that he go up on the top of

Mount Sinai and commit suicide to prove his sincerity for peace! This attitude was reflected at a higher level at the time of Camp David. I was back in Washington in September 1978 right after the signing of the Camp David Agreement and I ran into Ambassador Eilts near the State Department. I was pretty elated, not having been in on the negotiations, and ignorant of what concessions might have been made, etc. There was elation around Washington and I was caught up in it so I was rather taken aback when Ambassador Eilts was very discouraged by what had happened at Camp David. He, who had been one of the principal players since 1974 in bringing it about, was discouraged, and I asked him why. I don't remember his exact answer but the gist of it was that we demanded too much of Sadat and didn't get enough for him. By that time, of course, Sadat had no where to go. And it's interesting to think back on that encounter after Sadat was assassinated in October 1981, Hermann Eilts wrote an article in the Boston Globe a day or two after the assassination in which he said the United States pulled one of the triggers.

Another remarkable thing about Sadat's political skill was the way he was able to win over officials from the United States. He always had a way of persuading them that it was they who had gotten the concessions from them, they who had gotten him to change his position. He was always most willing to give them the credit. And they, of course, being good politicians in a democratic society with a lot of media attention, were very happy to take that credit or carry a message for him. In my opinion the whole process from 1973 to Camp David was due primarily to Sadat's initiative and determination.

Continuation of interview: May 22, 1991

Q: Art, after your assignment in Cairo, you moved on to the United Nations. What was your role there?

LOWRIE: Well I went to the United Nations only for the General Assembly in the fall of 1978 and I went as the supplemental Middle Eastern officer. Each of the geographic bureaus sends one to help out the regular officer. In 1978 my principal task was to flog

Camp David to try to get as many, particularly of the Middle Eastern countries, to accept the Camp David agreements which had just been signed, and particularly the framework agreement for the occupied territories.

Q: And what were the major problems or successes?

LOWRIE: Well, we didn't have much success. It really turned out to be a damage limitation operation. That is, trying to convince them not to get the Arab states to denounce the agreement. I can't remember his name now, but the most influential Arab spokesman in that General Assembly was a professor at an American university who was a Palestinian and a member of the Kuwaiti delegation. He subsequently died. But in 1978 when he spoke, all Arabs listened, and a lot of other countries listened as well. I spent a considerable amount of time with him, recognizing as we did that if we could win him over and he spoke out then we would be well on our way. And, I think after I had made the whole pitch that we were making at the time about how the dynamics of the situation, even though the Palestinians weren't getting anything instantly, that the dynamics of the situation, the wealth of the Arab countries, the political support that the Palestinians enjoyed around the world, the geography, the demography, that if they would only accept the framework agreement, enter into it in good faith, and carry out the transitional period that they would, in fact, be able to look forward to a Palestinian state after the transitional period was over—or something very close to a state. I thought we made some very convincing arguments, including the one that the PLO could be represented in the negotiating delegation. In a sense we did succeed because he said that he would not actively oppose the Camp David Accords, but he personally could not accept them and the reason he could not accept them was that even if everything the United States was saying came true in five years, the Palestinians would still be left with only 20% of their country. So that was the gist of what happened at the UN. As you know, shortly thereafter most Arab states broke off relations with Egypt and almost all of them denounced Camp David.

Q: Then your next posting at the NATO Defense College in Rome?

LOWRIE: Yes, that was just a six-month, I won't say vacation, but one of the senior training courses and we did a lot of traveling. I suppose the most valuable thing that came out of it for me was dealing with the military. There were very few civilians that attended the NATO Defense College so we dealt with the military of all the NATO countries and that was very useful for the future.

Q: Why do you suppose you were sent there?

LOWRIE: After Cairo, the Ambassador had asked me if I was interested in putting in to get my own post as an Ambassador but I had declined. I wanted to get out of Middle Eastern affairs for a while. And going to the NATO Defense College was a sure way to get a European posting.

Q: Your next posting was to the US Mission to the European Communities in Brussels?

LOWRIE: Yes, it was a little over three years and challenging from the intellectual point of view, complicated issues, very stable countries. They say major decisions in the European Community take about seven years to work their way through. But it was interesting, if not exciting. The European branch of the US Foreign Service is very different from the Middle East. The life is very comfortable, lots of money for things like periodicals and newspapers. I think I got three different newspapers, plus the Economist, at the office just for me. Whereas in most of the Middle Eastern embassies, you were lucky if the Embassy got two copies of the International Herald Tribune. Also, very sizeable representational allowances, nice housing, just a very different Foreign Service. Compared to service in the Middle East, it was boring, but the lifestyle made up for it and so it was a nice respite for almost three and a half years.

One great experience in USEC was working with Ambassador Tom Enders, probably the most intellectual, brilliant person I ever knew. We used to say his head was filled with computer chips.

Q: Then your next posting, what was your role as Political Advisor (POLAD) to the newly formed Central Command?

LOWRIE: Well, it was interesting, as an example of attitudes in the State Department, how that job came about. I was called on the phone one day in the summer of 1982 by the late Arnie Raphel who was then the Senior Deputy Assistant Secretary in NEA. He told me about this job and how I was absolutely the best guy to go down to the then Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force and work with the military in establishing this command for the Middle East. It would mean cutting my assignment by a year and going into a new job, but I wanted to do it. I really did feel that my Middle East background and my military background were such that I had trained for this job my whole career. Much to my surprise my Ambassador at the time, George Vest, who was the former Director of Politico-Military Affairs in the Department, recommended that I not take the job because it would not be a good career move—out of the mainstream. I was amazed to find that working with the US military, by the far the largest, the richest and most important branch of the government, was considered a poor career move even by a former Director of PM! Anyway, against his advice, I decided to take it and I moved to Tampa in November 1982. I spent over three years in that job as the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force became US Central Command in January 1983 working with General Kingston, the first Commander-in-Chief of CENTCOM.

Q: The Administration, what priority did it have in developing the Central Command?

LOWRIE: That's a very interesting question, because I worked with the European Bureau, the African Bureau, the Middle Eastern Bureau, and the Politico-Military Bureau. Every time I went to Washington, which was frequently, I was really working with four different bureaus. Each bureau took a very different view. The African Bureau, for example, was very receptive, very anxious to help CENTCOM in any way it could. In fact, they were so poor and got so little attention that any attention for African countries was welcomed. The European Bureau, which was important for the Central Command in terms of access

and cooperation with our allies, was interested but lukewarm. Why? Because they had much bigger fish to fry. They were interested in NATO and relations with the Soviet Union. They were interested in arms control and all of the very big issues of the Cold War, so CENTCOM and the defense of the Persian Gulf was way down on their list. The Politico-Military Bureau, a little bit like the African Bureau. They worked the most closely with the Pentagon so they were very supportive, but did not always throw a lot of weight around within the Department. The Middle Eastern Bureau was lukewarm, if anything, because the Arab states were reluctant to associate themselves with the United States military and with security arrangements because they thought it was politically suicidal.

Q: So there was a lot of difficulty in gaining Middle East cooperation?

LOWRIE: A lot of difficulty. I accompanied General Kingston on all of his trips abroad and we traveled extensively in the area. In 1983 it must have been 40% of our time trying to establish military-to-military relations, particularly with the countries of the Persian Gulf. We wanted access to their facilities, pre-positioning of equipment, joint exercises, joint intelligence sharing, joint planning, any of those things that are so important to military deployments. In the case of Egypt, for example, it was access and joint exercises. In the case of Oman, access to their very excellent facilities, as long as it was kept quiet. Pre-positioning was a difficult one; joint planning, very difficult; intelligence sharing, yes but it was usually us providing intelligence for them which they were happy to have but not getting much in return. But all of these during these early years 1983-84 were in a very embryonic stage.

Q: So basically you were starting from scratch?

LOWRIE: Pretty much. And that was one of my main roles, since the US military had relatively little experience in the Middle East, unlike Europe and the Far East where they had been for many years, there had been virtually no military presence in the Middle East. We got very few officer into CENTCOM who had been to the Middle East. So it

was to help on the political side that was a big part of my job, political sensitivities and so forth. On the State Department side the same thing was true. The Middle Eastern Bureau had had relatively little experience in dealing with the military in an operational way the way CENTCOM was now asking them to do. They had a lot of qualms about it and fears that the military would come in and take over, that they would be heavy handed, that they would send in too many people to do a little task, etc. In fact, we used to joke within CENTCOM that some of the Ambassadors, if it came down to an issue between the interest of their country and the United States, they would hesitate which direction they'd go. They were so worried about offending, or causing some ripples in their relations with their countries and offending the sensitivities of the countries.

Q: It sounds like quite a challenge.

LOWRIE: It was a challenge and it took a long time to get anywhere and I don't think we probably did get as far as we should have. We were helped a lot by the heating up of the Iran-Iraq War which scared the Gulf states a great deal. The one thing that I'm most proud of was getting a message sent out from the Department in 1985, which I wrote down in Tampa, to all the posts and Ambassadors in our AOR tasking them to come up with a short-term, mid-term, and long-term plan of what they could achieve for CENTCOM in terms of pre-positioning, exercises, cooperation with the military, access to facilities, etc., and to send back to the Department a plan on what their objectives were and how they were going to achieve them. Whether it would require arm twisting on the part of the United States, whether it would require worsening relations in order to get what we needed. And the fact that that tasking was made, I hope, led to some real progress. But as you know, I left CENTCOM in January 1986 before all the responses came back and the implementation began so I really do not have access to that information.

The other two things that I might mention that I'm particularly pleased to have been associated with were: (1) the practice of having departing or returning Ambassadors to CENTCOM countries come to CENTCOM. This established good personal relations

between the CINC and the senior staff of CENTCOM with the Ambassadors and also kept CENTCOM very much up to date with the kind of changing attitudes in the countries, and (2) I pushed very hard in working with the European Bureau for military-to-military relations with our NATO allies, particularly Great Britain, Italy, Portugal, France and the Netherlands. This paid off. We had in 1984 an anti-mine operation in the Red Sea in which the allies, for the first time participated with the Egyptian forces and the United States in an out-of-area exercise which had the express approval of NATO in a NATO communique. This was followed by NATO participation in the Gulf during the Iran-Iraq War and even more, of course, in the recent Persian Gulf War. But up until 1984 there had not been that kind of NATO sanctioned out-of-area cooperation.

Q: How difficult was it to get Arab support due to our support of Israel?

LOWRIE: Well as I mentioned earlier, that was one of the problems in dealing with the Arab countries with whom we were attempting to establish military-to-military relationships. There are lots of other reasons why it's difficult to have a military presence in any of the countries—anti-westernism, historical reasons, suspicion of the foreigner, Islam—but all of that was certainly exacerbated by the Israeli factor. And it's one of the reasons why Israel, Syria and Lebanon were all left out of the Central Commands area of responsibility (AOR) and left in the European command's AOR. The best example I can provide of how this relationship was complicated by the US-Israeli relationship, was the history of the formal strategic cooperation agreement between Israel and the United States. Despite the fact that from the very beginning Israel was considered a liability for the United States in dealing with the Arab states, the Israeli lobby and its supporters had pushed the myth that Israel was a strategic asset to the United States. In the late 1970s, a pro-Israeli lobbying group, the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs (JINSA) put out a series of very professional pamphlets on how Israel could serve as a strategic ally for the United States in the Middle East: one pamphlet on pre-positioning, one on access to Israeli facilities, one on the use of Israeli medical facilities in wartime and for emergencies, joint exercises, etc., all of the kind of things CENTCOM was attempting to establish with the Arab states.

Under the Reagan Administration this effort got off the ground and a very small, secretive joint political-military group was established to begin working out the arrangements. In December 1981 after Israel annexed the Golan Heights, the President suspended these discussions. But as a result of pressure from the Congress and pro-Israelis in the US Government such as Secretary of Navy Lehman, Stephen Bryen, Richard Perle and many others, talks began again in 1982. Then in December 1983 President Reagan made a commitment to formalize the strategic cooperation in an actual agreement. This was of great interest to CENTCOM because of what it would mean to our relations with the Arab states in terms of the military. But, we were not directly involved in the discussions which were highly classified. It was very difficult to even find out what was going on, but one thing was very clear to me and that was the US military had no interest in this so-called strategic cooperation with Israel. The best evidence I saw of that was one a visit to EUCOM during which we gave briefings for each other; i.e. by the seniors staffs including the Commander of the European Command and they made it very clear that the European Command had no interest in this. They said it was politically driven, that when it came to fighting the Soviet Union, which was the ostensible basis for the strategic cooperation, Israel would be, if not a nuisance to have to worry about it down there in the eastern Mediterranean, a very minimal asset in say neutralizing Syrian forces or something and that it was not worth the difficulties that it would entail from a military point of view. But they continued to be forced to engage in joint exercises and so forth by the political leaders in Washington. After January 1986, I'm not sure quite how it developed, but we do know it became formalized in an official agreement between the United States and Israel during the Reagan Administration.

Q: What was your greatest disappointment, Mr. Lowrie, during your long career?

LOWRIE: I had a great career. I loved all of it and I guess the only disappointment I have is that I wish I had spoken out more forcefully. I did speak out quite a bit but I wish I'd spoken out even more strongly. Also, when you're in the Foreign Service caught up in day-

to-day business it's very hard to study systematically your region, your country. I wish I'd taken more time to do that throughout my career.

Q: And your greatest achievement?

LOWRIE: I don't know if you can call it an achievement, but the things I enjoyed the most and felt the best about were during the Sadat years and my role as Political Counselor and such things as briefing Israeli journalists, and secondly, my role as the first Political Advisor in the Central Command and the things I mentioned there.

Q: What were your reasons for retiring?

LOWRIE: Well, I had 35 years and I was kind of burned out, in the best sense of the term, and not anxious to return either to Washington to go back to the Middle East. And I found Tampa and the people I met in Tampa, particularly my fianc#e, all very enticing so I decided to hang it up and stay in Tampa, and I'm very pleased I did.

Q: What other job opportunities were represented to you?

LOWRIE: Well, I wasn't interested in a full-time job but I did start within a year after retirement teaching at the University of South Florida and I've been teaching there ever since. I found that extremely rewarding and intellectually demanding and exciting. So I have the best of all possible worlds. But I loved my Foreign Service career.

Q: Thank you very much.

LOWRIE: You're welcome.

End of interview